

Intervista a SENSEI TAIJI KASE 1967

If you want meaningful results, you need to focus on one discipline. Taiji Kase

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E.: editor K.: Kase Sensei

E.: Sensei, we are happy to speak for the first time with a student of Masters Funakoshi Gichin and his son Yoshikata.

How old was Master Funakoshi when you first saw him?

K.: I think he was 70 to 72 at the time. It was during the last war. He still came from time to time to the Shotokan dojo. We were all a little scared of his fame: He always wanted to practice with us and we were always afraid of hurting him for lack of control. He had a round face, a bright complexion, and was quite short.

E.: Did he practice kata?

K.: Yes of course. For example he taught me Heian Shodan kata. Considering his great age he had entrusted the training to his favorite pupil Hironoshi. Her son Yoshikata Funakoshi came twice a week. Funakoshi Gichin's style was halfway between Okinawan forms and those of his son.

E.: If I understand correctly, modern Karate is rather the work of his son Yoshikata. How old was this one during the last war?

K.: He was 38 years old at the time and was in his prime, although very badly in the chest (he had tuberculosis from a young age). Sometimes he would stop in the middle of his training and go to suffer in a corner of the Dojo and then come back apologizing, to train harder. As at the age of 12 he was told that he was condemned by tuberculosis and that he would not pass the age of 20, so he had decided to try to pass before his death on the spiritual side of the Karate through unlimited training. And he was not dead. This is, I believe, the origin of his extraordinary mental and technical strength. His face full of life appeared to be that of a healthy man. But to come back to your previous question,

E.: What were the differences between the technique or the style of the father and the son?

K.: Gichin threw Okinawa-style kicks, short and strong in high posture, although much more modern than Okinawa. His style was a form of self defense. His son on the contrary, innovated kicks, unknown in Okinawa like Mawashi, Yoko and Ushiro-Geri, Mawashi-Uchi etc..., in a very long and deep way, much more sporty. His father totally approved of his idea but given his already advanced age did not try to apply this style suitable for younger academics. During the war, the first students of modern style were Hironishi, Hayashi, Uemura. All were 4th Dan, the highest rank at that time. No one was 5th Dan.

E.: When Funakoshi father came to the Dojo, did he correct the techniques taught by his son?

K.: Yes of course. And it was sometimes very funny. For example, it was Funakoshi father who for the first time taught me to make a fist. He told me that if I let my index finger stretched out under my thumb it would be easier for me to form a fist. He did it very well himself, perhaps because his fingers were very short and very thick. The next week Funakoshi Jr. came to the Dojo and in the middle of class noticed my fist and said, "What is this way of clenching your fist?" What a teacher could have taught you here in such a bad way! You should get your index finger in! It may be more difficult but it is stronger! You never have to look for the easiest way! "

I said to him: "It was your father who taught me this way of clenching my fist ...".

So he smiles and says softly: "Good ... But do as I tell you anyway!" "

Yoshikata adored her father and the latter gave him complete confidence. Sometimes they would discuss together laughing in the Dojo and Yoshikata would say to his students, alongside his father: "My father does bad Karate!" "

The latter replied: "You are my student and you must do as I say".

The son replied: "My father, you must do modern Karate".

Finally, laughing, Funakoshi father said to the students: "Well, follow my son's path, it is the best! "

E.: How many times a week did the students train?

K.: The Shotokan was not too big. There were about 40 of us each time three times a week. The academics came from time to time to progress. When I first saw them I was amazed by their speed and strength and thought I would never be able to match them. I was still under the impression of the atemi that I had learned at the Kodokan where I practiced Judo. I was then second Dan. The difference was huge.

E.: Were there karate competitions at that time?

K.: No not yet. There was only training "between schools" which was much harder than the refereed competitions. We practiced Sambon Kumite, Ippon Kumite, and finally Ju-Kumite if we were of the same style and without reservations. But with the other styles we were only doing Ju-Kumite. As we never stopped the blows, the seniors came to referee and tried to limit the damage. They would leap to separate us as soon as the Kumite turned into a street fight. To be honest there was a lot to do.

E.: What is your best memory from that time?

K.: Ah! .. I have lost all of my front teeth and my left ribs. I was only the first Kyu and my satisfaction was breaking the nose and right ribs of the one who had broken my teeth.

Brown belts have always been the most terrible; no control and poor technique. This training was called "Kokan-Geiko" which means "collective training to progress". In a competition we stop once the fight is over. In the "Kokan Geiko" we never stopped and even got hurt until we met everyone.

E.: If this is your "best memory" what could be the worst?

K.: I was very lucky, I was small and I never had anything serious. Many of my comrades lost an eye. We were all very young and only the spirit of combat animated us. Even now when we talk about doing "Kokan-Geiko" my heart is cheerful at the memory of this period;

E.: Did your small size not bother you, especially for your reach?

K.: No, and that was the advantage of Shotokan. We were attacking from very far and in depth and I was not embarrassed. The other Karateka of different styles attacked in high posture, often as in boxing, or in this case the extension is indeed important.

E.: Was your knowledge of Judo useful?

K.: No, I think it was rather the opposite. At first I thought I could throw with a grab but got a lot of hard hits when trying to grab my opponent. Then when I didn't grab it I only did it with one hand to eventually block or move. Later I understood a lot of things. For example, when I grabbed my opponent, if he grabbed me too, I hit immediately. Instead of trying to project. Karate's throwing technique is very different from that of Judo. In Karate, grabbing and throwing must be as fast as a kicking or punching attack, otherwise it's too late. All this requires a particular technique.

E.: And why did you switch from judo to Karate?

K.: I started practicing Judo at the age of 6 and I was studying at the Kodokan. Then I heard that Karate was very strong, that one hit could kill. So I bought Funakoshi's book and was very impressed with the postures I had never seen in the Kodokan. I then went to the Shotokan and I was very impressed by the heavy and tense atmosphere of Karate while at the Kodokan it was much more relaxed. In Judo I could be a little lazy and just block. In Karate it was not possible. So I entered Shotokan while still continuing Judo. After passing the first Dan of Karate my Master said to me: "You can like Karate and Judo but you have to choose between the two, because each discipline will give you a particular musculature and you will not be able to progress very high. I thought for a long time and finally chose Karate.

E.: So you don't think we can practice Judo and Karate?

K.: If you don't want to progress very high, it's possible, but if you want valid results, you have to focus on one discipline. For example if someone feels that he is limited in Judo and that he is young, he can do Karate and go up quite high. It is the same in Aikido. This is more a matter of muscles and nervous reaction than of mind or dispersal of thought.

E.: In your opinion which Budo is best suited to the practice of Karate?

K.: Karate is what can go best with Karate. Perhaps Bo-Jutsu goes well with Karate because the positions are similar.

E.: Kendo? ..

K.: No, in fact I have often seen 2nd or 3rd Dan from Judo, Kendo, Aikido coming to Karate, I hardly ever heard of Karateka who switched to Judo.

E.: What are the possible reasons?

K.: Maybe because you can have a lot of fun training Karate alone, progress and feel good. If he reaches a certain level, a Karateka generally does not feel the urge to practice another martial art.

E.: After the war and the death of YOSHIKATA, who taught at the Shotokan?

K.: HIRONISHI was an instructor and was assisted by seniors who had returned from the war such as NAKAYAMA, OBATA, KAMATA, EGAMI. Their classes were very theoretical and they themselves trained little. They were often ten or twelve at each training to surround us so that we train harder, lower, faster. It was still a tough time. But I have fond memories of it. I was the boss of my university, and as a captain I made my juniors look tough; I didn't do much myself ...

But in the evening I became like a novice again and was beaten by the Seniors. I was the youngest post-war 3rd Dan, the highest rank at that time! I was twenty years old! When I think about it now I'm still amazed. No doubt I wasn't too bad at that time...

E.: How did you get this 3rd Dan?

K.: It was during the first graduation where all the seniors from all Shotokan universities got together. We were three candidates. We had to fight among ourselves and against the examiners who asked us to do so. It was in 1949. A very hard examination! The Shotokan was proud of its level, all three of us were received; my two companions were TAGAKI from CHUO University and SHIMAMURA from TAKUSHOKU University.

E.: What was the level of Karate after the war?

K.: Alas I must say that he had regained the level before the war. But the level during the war was very different, much higher. We were trying to make each hit truly fatal. The government had asked us not to worry about accidents in order to be ready for war. So it was very easy to make great progress at that time.

E.: What results did the post-war American ban on Karate Budo have?

K.: We are incredibly lucky. When the order came from the occupation army to stop any practice of Budo which had favored the spirit of war, Judo, Kendo and Aikido were forced to stop. But Karate is never banned. One of our ministers then president of the Karate association told the Americans that Karate was "Chinese boxing"... not Japanese. Luckily no further investigation was carried out and I even believe that no official came to attend the training, otherwise I believe that Karate would have been the first on the list of forbidden martial arts...

E.: But is it not true that many GI'S were initiated into Karate?

K ∴ Yes, but only at the start of the Korean War. We were hitting the Americans hard and many were quite seriously put out of action. It was during this Korean war that the Americans asked the Japanese to intensively resume training in Judo, Kendo and Aikido... What is mine pretty funny opinion!